

“THE SHORT, SHORT YEARS AND THE
SENSE OF A LONG, LONG TIME.”

Being

The Sermon on the Last Sunday of the Year

BY

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M 41

READINGS

ETERNITY PRESENT

We love to be spoken to in tones from the borders of the infinite, and feel them to have a native sound. Carrying in ourselves secret relationships with universal space and unbeginning time through Him that fills them both and lives in us, we know the tidings which come furthest from them to be nearest to us: they remind us of our augustest kindred: they free us from our momentary prison. The intellect, which seeks to transcend the finite in space and time and truth; the conscience, which owns the infinite in duty and stays itself on the infinite in love; indicate the scale of our affinities. Moulded of perishable and imperishable elements, we sink and rise, we sleep and wake, we faint and struggle on; toiling outwardly for transitory wants, pining inwardly with everlasting thirst. Be it not in blind consciousness that we carry in us the seal of the Eternal. . . . Shall the years sweep by and take from us all that is mortal, without waking the immortal life within us from the winter in which it sleeps? Shall we wait to die into the surprise of God, instead of taking his dear and solemn converse now and for ever? Shall we dream of a future eternity, and be blind to that which surrounds us every instant,—which brings its judgments to our conscience, its present God to our trust, its might company of saints to our affection?

JAMES MARTINEAU.

Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God.

For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.

Thou carriest the years away as with a flood: they are as a sleep.

The days of our years are threescore years and ten, or even by reason of strength fourscore years.

So teach us to number our days that we may get us a heart of wisdom.

O satisfy us in the morning with Thy loving kindness, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

Let Thy work appear unto Thy servants and Thy glory unto their children.

And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us;

And establish Thou the work of our hands upon us, yea, the work of our hands, establish Thou it.

Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; let me know how frail I am.

Behold Thou hast made my days as handbreadths; and my life-time is as nothing before Thee.

For I am a stranger with Thee, a sojourner, as all my fathers were.

For the wind passeth over it and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more.

Seeing his days are determined, the number of his months is with Thee, and Thou hast appointed his bounds that he can not pass.

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say: I have no pleasure in them.

And desire shall fail, because man goeth to his everlasting home and the mourners go about the streets.—BIBLE.

PRAYER

O Thou who art from everlasting to everlasting, Ancient of Days, yet ever new, all things wax old as doth a garment, but Thou art the same and Thy years shall not fail. We who are born amid the things of time and swaddled in a vesture of sense, turn to catch some glimpse of things eternal. Our life is but a moment in the vastness of eternity, and yet it is long enough for us to grow old and careworn. We inherit wisdom from all the ages, the key of hidden treasure is in our hands, but we do not understand the truth; we are very wise, rich and increased with goods, but often miss the way.

Thou hast set us amid the bonds of time. We cannot crowd our purposes into such a narrow space. We cannot understand the brevity of life; we are just learning how to work, just catching some glimpse of its meaning; a sudden call, and we are gone.

We bless Thee for the many sweet and solemn memories that surround our time and place, and win us to love the simplicity of wisdom and the beauty of holiness. Awaken us to feel how great a thing it is to live at the end of so many ages, heirs to the thoughts of the wise, the labours of the good, the prayers of the devout. Gather and kindle their power in our hearts; and as we muse upon them, may their fire burn within us.

Since Thou hast planted our feet in a world so full of chance and change that we know not what a day may bring forth, and hast curtained every day with night and rounded our little lives with sleep, grant that we may use with diligence our appointed span of time, working while it is called day. Let our knowledge and our years drop from us that the thoughts and ways which keep our hearts unaged may claim us as their own.

As the old year ends and is sealed with the years that are filled and done, grant us peace with the world and the world peace with us, peace in our own hearts and with each other. Whether we sing in the light or lament in the shadow, whether Thou shinest upon us or thunderest before our face, may we live as in Thy care and keeping. Amen.

“THE SHORT, SHORT YEARS AND THE SENSE OF A LONG, LONG TIME.”

We are thinking this morning of how many years there have been since man came to note the passing of time and to call the measure years; and of how long it was before they were called years, or called anything; and of how long before that when there was no one here to note the passing time at all.

The philosophically inclined have always speculated much about the nature of time. The more practically inclined have been content to measure it. We suppose that at first it must have been measured only by the light and the dark, or by the moving shadow of a tree, the forerunner of the sun dial, or by the time it took a stick to burn, or by a candle's length, or by sand running through a glass. Nothing did they have to divide the second's length, or to note accurately the fractional part as our affairs require.

We like to read over the old calendars of the world, some twenty of them. This year with us is 1926 and the 7526 of the Grecian; the 7435 of the Byzantine; the 5687 of the Jewish; the 2679 of the Roman and the 2702 of the Olympiads, seventeen of them dating from a time earlier than our era. We are reminded of the mortality of human enterprises when we reflect that each of these calendars once was new. With each, men were leaving all the past and beginning all over again with the year one, confident that their era would go on forever from that day. All time to come would date from their year.

Today we hardly know the names of these eras that once were new, and long as familiar as our 1926.

In the Prayer Book we find tables for computing church festival days up to 8500 A. D., over sixty-five hundred years from now, when others will be interested in finding when Easter comes. We shall not be concerned with tables of days. It gives us a strange feeling to write the far years hence 8500 A. D. and know that others will watch that year in and out and that we shall be through with years.

We never sense just how long time is, a certain measure of it, except when a little part of it is marked off. Sometimes a man was sentenced to die when a candle burned down, or the doctor gives but two months or an hour to live. That makes a bit of it stand out, consciously felt as short and precious. Years may have passed without noting them much. One may have read of aeons of time, of thousands of years of recorded history, then, with all this time, aeons of it, only a candle's length, or a month, or an hour.

At first we do not sense time very much or care if it does pass. We say, "Let it pass, the more the better. Let it speed on as rapidly as it will and bring us more years to our credit. Let us get older as fast as we can." Time, nothing but the passing of time can bring us out of our limitations and out of the embarrassment of being charged with youth and inexperience. Time drags when we want it to hurry us on to the state and the stature we would reach. Then we say, "How long it seems, and it is only another year." Ten, twenty more, each as long as this, must come, be lived through and go, before we can be up to where only time can bring us. "O Time,"

we say, "you do much but it takes you so long and we want you to do it so quickly. God and time have done wonders but so long before the wonder is done."

Then, after while, the years do begin to speed along quite rapidly enough and we begin to say it the other way, "What, so soon, another year?" It seems but yesterday we were doing the last rites for the old year 1925, and here is another year to be put away with some observance. Time's leaden feet, that just drag along, sprout wings after while, as Mercury's did, that swift courier.

We always are interested in the amount of time that is sensed and consciously carried as the setting in which the life moves and has its being. Some seem to sense only today and to live only in it. Their time sense may not range much farther back than the oldest inhabitant, or a near ancestor, and not much beyond next year, or ten years from now. As to going back to the beginning of the history of our country, or Rome, or Egypt, or man's first coming on the earth, or geologic time, those vast stretches of time before we came here, this great sweep of the past and the far time ahead, there seems to be no concern whatever about this and it does not seem to be present even occasionally in the consciousness. A mind in its range may not require much more time than it has actually lived. It may be wholly contemporaneous. Other men go through even the routine of the uneventful day conscious of the long time, in which their present day is felt to be one with Nineveh and Tyre and the cooling of the globe. They are conscious always of time's ceaseless flow, bearing on planets, suns and systems,

man, dynasties and civilizations, the great and the little, to some doom or fair destiny.

Men in all centuries have tried to frame this into words to impress us with its truth. "A thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past and as a watch in the night," is one way it has been said. "As a drop of water unto the sea, as a gravel-stone in comparison with the sand, so are a thousand years to the day of eternity," is another way it was said a long time ago. "If a little bird should come back once in a thousand years and sharpen its beak on a mountain of granite, one hundred miles high, when it is worn away, that would be but one day of eternity," is a more recent way of saying it. "The age of things is as if one were to gently rub a silk handkerchief across Plymouth Rock once a year until it were reduced to a pebble," is another way it has been said. These are all trying to make us feel how very long it is.

The view of a very long time is now supplanting that in which all the races of the world have lived from the first until now, the view that we are not very old, that things are not very old. Our sense of time is that which came from the Hebrew book. It is the sense of a very short time. Not very long ago we began, and all things began at the same time with us. We are all of the same age and all new together. Sixty centuries, that is all, the outmost stretch of the old chronology. Only sixty times as long as it has been since Monroe was President, would carry us back to the time when all was just new born and made, say those who take their time from the Book. Sixty centuries with three generations to a century would make ours about the one hundred and eight-

tieth generation on the earth, only one hundred and seventy-nine generations before us here. Sixty centuries is not very long, one hundred and eighty generations are not very many, yet, that is the sense of time had by all who take their facts from the Book.

One cannot walk the streets today and think of himself as one of one hundred and eighty generations. He is one generation not of one hundred and eighty back of him, but, one of thousands and thousands of generations, so very many that no one presumes to say how many, just like ours, have come and gone in that interminable past reaching back so far that Adam and Moses are relatively our contemporaries.

One does not cast off this old time sense and come into the new time sense of our generation without feeling its effects. We believe that a strict and accurate diagnosis of many disturbed minds of our generation would be that they are not yet completely adjusted to the new sense of time. We stand back amazed at the new universe. Some stand discouraged and paralyzed before it.

There is no experience which lays hold of us with such dire and often detrimental effect as to go from where we have been somebody of importance to where we are of no importance whatever. It takes the heart out of us. Then it takes the most persistent mastery of the human spirit to keep up and make life seem worth while at all. Without knowing it, without sensing fully just what the matter is, many minds today, especially those of the more thoughtful sort, are in just this situation. All at once they are transferred from a little world in space, and a short world in time, where mankind was

something and where they in their own minds were somebody, to a world in which they feel themselves as nothing. Transfer one from the crossroads of Kentucky to New York City, the feeling he would have, what that would do to him, is quite an exact parallel of what has happened to many in our time who have been transferred from the little Hebrew stage, with man much and time short, to this sense of endless time and man but a late comer. With this may come the discouraging feeling that man is as incidental as he is recent. Many today have not been able to feel themselves at home in the new time which is so very, very long. They have not been able to rise out of the discouragement that came when they discovered that they are not one of a few generations in a short time, but one of many in a long time.

It will do something to one's estimate of himself. It will be self-subduing, self-diminishing, almost self-extinguishing. It may puncture conceit of one's relative importance on this little planet as well as in the great order. One with an ever present sense of the length of time will not be likely to think more highly of himself than he ought to think. It may be a great blow to self-importance. His little fame and place may be shrunk to a point. One may at first be literally undone by the consciousness that he is but a point in time and space. It might take away all zest for life. It does sometimes. The keen edge of ambition may be dulled. That very motive power which keeps us going may for a time be lost. One with difficulty may summon enough of a sense of his worth and place to give zest to the going on. It does

affect some this way and that is serious, for, we do have to feel ourselves important, we do have to conceive of our place among our fellows as considerable, to hold us up to do what we can do. That is one effect to be reckoned with when one gets this new sense of the long, long time.

But this sense of self-depreciation is not wholly an unmixed evil. If it tends to make some things important that we ought not to neglect, it tends, too, to make some things unimportant that it is well to neglect and to forget. A thousand and one things that stir and worry and provoke them, will be seen as the trivial and temporary things they are, to those who carry consciously with them this sense of the long, long time. The confusions, the little mishaps of the day and hour, the little irritations of things and people, will slide into their proper place, which is a little place, when one thinks of them over against the long, long time. If one carries about with him this sense of the long time, each person, event, and circumstance, will be viewed in perspective. The little will seem the little that it is and only that will be taken seriously, and to heart, which would seem to matter in the long, long time. Much that annoys will shrink and rather shrivel up when thought of in terms of a century, or of a thousand years, or of an eternity of time. As grief, the sense of a long time is:

“Strong to consume small troubles; to commend
Great thoughts, grave thoughts, thoughts lasting to
the end.”

And time is a great cleanser and healer. Nothing else but the passing of time can do it. That desolating sense of the failure that we made ; that unconscionable thing we did and said ; that painful sense of embarrassment, of chagrin, the awkwardness unintended and the pain we meant to give and regretted in shame and tears ; the hurt of loss, and guilt, and separation, all the irrecoverable and irredeemable, the committed past that cannot be undone, recalled or changed, all these, nothing but time can affect. Days must come and years, may be centuries for us, before these can be made less, so that we can stand the hurt and be comfortable again. As the stream purifies and cleanses all that is cast in it, before it has gone far, so, the stream of time, its ceaseless flow, can cleanse and cast out. Only time can heal many of our hurts.

“O Time ! who knowest a lenient hand to lay
Softly on sorrow’s wound, and slowly thence
The faint pang steals unperceived away.
O Time ! on thee I rest my only hope at last.”

This sense of a long time is here and we have to fit ourselves into it. It is here to stay. It is not going to get any easier for us. We have to think of ourselves in this new space and in this new time in which our life is but a point and a second. We have to accustom ourselves to live with this new consciousness. The little toy universe and the span of sixty centuries are gone never to return. These will hold and be revived by the credulous sects, but never again can hold the intelligence of the world. We have to recover our sense of

importance and our sense of worth in this new time. We have to bring our old values which made life livable, and our eternal souls possible, into this new order of a long, long time. We cannot go on indefinitely either in happiness, or with effectiveness, unless we can rise out of the consciousness that all is so futile because all is so temporal. That one is but a tick in eternity is the sense out of which black despair is born.

One counsel is to live in the present moment only, with high animal spirits. "Today is yours, live in it, looking neither before nor after, with nothing past nor to come to depress or to cheer." Of all counsel, this seems least likely to meet our case. This seems to reckon not at all with where we live, nor with the direction whence the splendor comes that lights our present hour and day. Man alone, or men together, cannot live in the immediate moment, however full of delight it is. The present moment and the present cheer get most of their color from some great scheme in which they are set, some scheme of things which runs on far ahead. It is largely the present sense of what is coming after to-morrow, and on the many tomorrows, that gives vividness to our now, our today. William James always stressed this truth, not always felt, "The lustre of the present hour is always borrowed from the background of future possibilities that go with it. In the practical life of the individual, we know how his whole gloom, or glee, about any present fact depends on remoter schemes and hopes with which it stands related." Let the present hour be full of all desired, a perfect hour, vivid, colorful, life to the brim, then, in that full hour, "Let it be

known to lead nowhere, and however agreeable it may be in its immediacy, its glow and gilding vanish." Let the knowledge come in that most perfect hour of life that it is his last with health and strength for his schemes; let it be known that some circumstance of that very day will require him to forego all that he has planned and to recast his scheme of things entire, and to drag life out in helplessness and dependency, then, he would see where it is he lives and from what direction today's splendor comes. Shut out that foreground, draw a curtain over it, blot it out, and most of what cheers the present hour will vanish as a light goes out in the dark. "One told that he is sick with an insidious disease," Professor James reminds us, "may laugh and quaff his wine at first as well as ever, but he knows his fate now and the knowledge knocks the satisfaction out of all these functions."

It is the sense of permanency, of going on for some time at least, in which we live. More time will be ours. Today's life with us and all its satisfactions are closely linked with our schemes for tomorrow, more than we are aware. Today is what it is because it is set in remoter schemes. This is why no animal philosophy of eating and drinking today, without thought of tomorrow, has ever for long been able to satisfy the discerning. It does not reckon with life where we live it. It shuts out the part of life from which the color comes. No philosophy of life as something only immediate and transient and temporary will support one permanently in his going.

We require remoteness, the sense of coming time and coming events, in which we shall share, to make the

present hour. We require some permanence and continuation of things and ourselves to make either things or ourselves seem worth our attention. Emerson thought that our minds delight only in immense time. He says that we like the redwood tree whose life will span the history of mankind, and the architecture that lasts, Parthenon and Pyramid, and the ancient mounds. "We delight in stability, and really are interested in nothing else. What lasts a century pleases us in comparison with what lasts an hour. But a century compared with a true antiquity looks dwarfish and recent; it does not help the matter adding numbers if we see that it has an end, which it will reach just as surely as the shortest. A candle a mile long or a hundred miles long does not help the imagination; only a self-feeding fire, an inextinguishable lamp, like the sun and the star that we have not yet found date and origin for." Only these which wax old but do not end are long enough to interest us permanently.

The sense of a long time is a part of the mind with which we now have to take the world from day to day. It is longer than men before us thought it to be. The spaceless and the timeless, which make all the glory that we have, must be thought of now as set in a larger and an older place.

